

# The Case for Critical Media Literacy and Digital Ethics

Wikileaks and false news; an American Presidency run via Twitter; *Charlie Hebdo*; hackers manipulating elections, stealing corporate secrets and shutting down public utilities; mass surveillance via the internet of things; 24/7 news, information and disinformation cycles broadcast continuously on public and personal screens; wall-to-wall cultures of celebrity and political bullying and libel via social media; social media supplanting face-to-face relations at dinner tables and in bedrooms; conspiracy theories overriding peer refereed science ... No wonder many young people are checking out into worlds of videogames, comic superheroes and pharmacologically altered realities. While schools and school systems stand frozen in the headlights ...

Much of the current educational work in digital literacies and multiliteracies has, fortunately, been built around a positive thesis around the emergence of new technologies as media for learning, identity formation and social relations (Livingstone & Sefton-Green 2016). Many of us working in the field have assiduously avoided the moral panic affiliated with the emergence of new technologies (Luke 1990). This said, our view is that to remain silent about the educational implications and consequences of current political, social and economic events and forces would be to abrogate an ethical



**ALLAN LUKE**

Ph.d.

Emeritus Professor

at Queensland University of Technology, Australia

[az.luke@qut.edu.au](mailto:az.luke@qut.edu.au)



**JULIAN SEFTON-GREEN**

Ph.d.

Professor of New Media Education

at Deakin University, Australia

[julian.seftongreen@deakin.edu.au](mailto:julian.seftongreen@deakin.edu.au)

responsibility to schools, youth and children and their communities. In this brief essay, we want to make a renewed and urgent case for *critical* media literacy as an ethical response to current social and cultural, political and ideological conditions.

Our current situation is stark and simple, and probably can't be understated. We live in an era where governments and political culture are modeling and exploiting the unethical, immoral and destructive use of digital media, and attacking the longstanding practices and criteria of print journalism, broadcast journalism, and peer-refereed science. Children and young adults inhabit an online environment where new forms of exchange, creativity and community sit alongside new forms of criminality and bullying, real and symbolic violence. We are increasingly shaped and ruled by powerful corporations that are profiting from the reorganization of everyday life by social media and digital tools, making business deals with autocratic and theocratic states to suppress, control and surveil citizens, engaging in dubious labor practices, are implicated in forms of production and manufacture that are environmentally unsustainable, and who bury profits to avoid taxation responsibilities that might fund improved education, health care and communities. And there is a well-documented multinational state/corporate nexus that monitors and surveils communications and exchange at all levels for their own commercial and political purposes. Nor is this all idle ideological debate: many communities have to contend with the stark realities of everyday poverty, violence, warfare and terrorism, unstable policing and public security, the effects of environmental decay and climate change, public health and large-scale mental health crises, and the unavailability of meaningful and skilled work.

Digital technology per se didn't cause these problems, nor does it in and of itself have the capacity to solve or fix them. But the current situation requires a remaking of citizenship, ethics, and a renewed social contract. This will require an ongoing "problematicisation", to use Freire's (1970) term, of these conditions as focal in the curriculum, thematically crossing social studies, the arts and sciences. Our view is that critical media literacy, multiliteracies and digital arts can be a staging ground for that new civic space – where critique and technical mastery can lead to 'transformed' and, in instances, 'conserved' practices. The curriculum challenge is about setting the grounds for rebuilding of community relations of work, exchange and trust – while at the same time giving young people renewed and powerful tools for weighing, analyzing and engaging with truths and lies, representations and misrepresentations, narratives and fictions, re-

sidual and emergent traditions, competing cultural epistemologies and world views.

## The everyday challenges for youth

How do today's young people and children deal with right and wrong, truth and falsehood, representation and misrepresentation in their everyday lives online? How do they anticipate and live with and around the real consequences of their online actions and interactions with others? How do they navigate the complexities of their public exchanges and their private lives, and how do they engage with parental and institutional surveillance? Finally, how can they engage and participate as citizens, consumers and workers in the public and political, cultural and economic spheres of the internet? These questions are examined in current empirical studies of young peoples' virtual and real everyday lives in educational institutions and homes (e.g., Livingstone & Sefton-Green 2016; Quan-Haase 2004). On the ground, the everyday issues faced by digital youth are *prima facie* ethical matters. This is a key beginning point in an era where the ethical/moral implications of all forms of literacy are at once educational imperatives for informed, critical citizenship, civic participation and everyday social relations.

In this regard, the push towards a critical digital ethics and critical media literacy is the central educational challenge. It is not new, with prototypical work on media literacy initiated in Canada as early as the 1970s, evolving from broadcast TV and print advertising to current work on digital media internationally (Luke 1990). But it has largely been seen as an adjunct to the core curriculum – this result is a relegation of new media into the category of popular culture, as neither part of the educational 'basics' nor of longstanding school subjects of literature and scientific disciplines.

There are now almost continuous public calls for heightened child protection and surveillance in response to widespread moral panic around digital childhood (e.g., Havey & Puccio 2016). To refer to this as a moral panic is not to understate the very real challenges and difficulties that digital technology raises for parents and families, schools and teachers. It is however, to acknowledge popular discourses and widespread generational frustration about the effects of digital technology on everyday life. These range from concerns about the displacement of embodied activity, physical play and face-to-face verbal exchange by compulsive online messaging and gaming, to online harassment, bullying, real and symbolic violence, from

sexual and commercial exploitation of young people and children, to exposure to violence, pornography, ideological indoctrination and outright criminal behavior.<sup>1</sup> Their power to generate fascinating new expressive forms and relationships, to reshape the arts and sciences notwithstanding – digital media are amplifiers of the best and the worst, the sublime and the mundane, the significant and the most trivial elements of human behaviour, knowledge and interaction. How could it be any other way? It is all here online: statements, images, sounds, and acts of hatred and love, war and peace, bullying and courtship, truth and lies, violence and care, oppression and liberation – and every possible third or fourth space, in ever proliferating redundancy, cut through with noise and clutter.

## The policy response

In the meantime, educational systems continue to pursue business as usual: a neoliberal consensus whereby human capital, standardization and commodification of the curriculum, and accountability via transnational testing regimes narrow the parameters of what will count as knowledge and schooling to human capital for economic competitiveness. If there is an unintended effect of the emergence of nationalist and xenophobic backlash, it is a reconsideration of the movement across OECD countries – aided and abetted by PISA – to a curriculum consensus that, in effect, reduces knowledge to a technical and measurable commodity for the ‘new economy’. What has been lost is the focus on what Delors (1996) called “learning to live together” and models of “active citizenship”, which, fortunately, have defied measurement and standardization but, accordingly, have been left by the side of the road in models of education for human capital job skills.

At the same time, the appropriation of digital multiliteracies (New London Group 1996) into the official curriculum has been fertile ground for neoliberal educational policy. Our view is that there are three forms of the colonization of digital multiliteracies: (1) Digital multiliteracies have been incorporated into the human capital rationale, the very heart of corporate neoliberalism: redefined as requisite job skills or ‘tools’ for the new economy. This strips it out of a broader critical education, it can silence classroom debate over the morality, ethics, and everyday social consequences of communications media, their ownership and control; (2) Digital multiliteracies have been redefined as a measurable domain of curriculum for standardized assessment: digital tasks will be included in the current PISA testing. This has the effect of normalizing, controlling what official-

ly ‘counts’ as digital creativity, critique and innovation; (3) Digital multiliteracies have been the object of commodification, with curriculum packages, approaches, methods and materials offered by publishers, corporations and consultants. This has the effect of eliminating the local, idiosyncratic, cultural play and interaction with new media and supplanting it with formulae and scripts, inevitably aligned with (1) and (2) above.

The alternative is to view critical media literacy as an ‘open’ curriculum space for students and their teachers to explore, critique and construct texts, identities, forms of social and community actions (Share 2009). This is about as new as Dewey’s (1907/2012) discussion of the project or “enterprise”. In Australia, digital multiliteracies and critical media literacy have ‘worked’ precisely because there wasn’t an official curriculum definition, or even a formal academic/scholarly *doxa* around it. But over the last decade of Neoliberal governance, the move has been to put all curriculum and pedagogy in the box of standardization, assessment, accountability, control and surveillance – aided by government initiated and corporate-sponsored work in the ‘learning sciences’ to measure and assess digital practices. This is an appropriation of multiliteracies into the same system of standardization and commodification that defined and delimited print literacy and traditional curriculum. And it sets the terms for systems to replicate yet again the core problems with the teaching of print literacy: a ‘closed’ curriculum that yields differentiated and stratified achievement.

## Critical media literacy and digital ethics

How we can enlist and harness these media to learn to live together in diversity, mutual respect and difference, addressing complex social, economic and environmental problems while building convivial and welcoming, just and life-sustaining communities and societies is the key educational problem facing this generation of young people and their teachers. This is an ethical vision and an ethical challenge.

Our case is that a digital ethics – indeed, an ethics of what it is to be human and how to live just and sustainable lives in these technologically saturated societies and economies – is *the* core curriculum issue for schooling. Nor do we believe that is it an adequate educational or philosophic or political response to current cultural, geopolitical and economic conditions and events for this generation of teachers and scholars, parents, caregivers and community elders to simply document or celebrate the emergence of new digital youth

cultures without an attempt to call out ethical parameters and concrete historical consequences for communities, cultures and, indeed, human existence in this planetary ecosystem. This is a generational and pedagogic responsibility as we stand at a juncture where residual and emergent cultures meet, where Indigenous and non-Indigenous, historically colonized and colonizing, settler and migrant communities attempt to reconcile and negotiate new settlements, where traditional, modernist and postmodern forms of life and technologies sit alongside each other, uneasily, often with increasing inequity and violence. Our view is that this is a moment that requires more from researchers, scholars and educators than descriptions of instances of local assemblage or student voice. Following on from Naomi Klein's (2015) analysis of the effects of capitalism, technology and modernity on the planetary ecosystem – our view is that this historical convergence of forces and events has the potential to “change everything”.

The question of who owns, regulates and controls, and indeed profits and dominates from control and use of the dominant modes of information comes centre stage, shifting from religious authorities to the state and, ultimately, to the industrial and postindustrial, national and transnational corporation (Graham, in press/2017). Some regimes burn books, others write, print and mandate them; some governments censor the internet, all use it and monitor it; disputes over hate speech, libel and what can and cannot be said in the media-based civic sphere are now daily news – alongside of revelations of the profit structures, labor practices, environmental consequences and taxation schemes of those media and technology corporations that have become arguably the most profitable and dominant businesses in human history. Note that this political economy of communications typically is *not* studied in schools – even as this corporate order competes for the *edubusiness* of what counts as knowledge, how it is framed and assessed within these same schools (Picciano & Spring 2012).

To begin to set a curriculum agenda for teaching and learning digital ethics, then, we outline three key foundational claims. First is the imperative for a critical literacy that enables the weighing and judging and critical analysis of truth claims *vis a vis* their forms, genres, themes, sources, interests and silences (Luke, in press/2017). Our second claim is that the curriculum should entail both the study of the sources of information and their apparent distortions and ideological ‘biases’ – and that such study can be extended to understanding the relationships between knowledges and global, planetary interests, including the corporate ownership, capitali-

zation and profit from dominant modes of information. Our third claim is core to the establishment of any set of ethics: that any school-based approach to media literacy and digital ethics must move beyond silences, prohibitions and negative injunctions to the reconstructive project of modeling and enacting digital citizenship, convivial social relations, and action for social justice in education, economy and culture.

## Notes

1. e.g., <http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/Home.aspx>

## References

- Delors, J. [et al.] (1996) *Learning: the treasure within*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Dewey, J. (1907/2012). *The School in Society & The Child in the Curriculum*. New York: Courier Press.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. M. Ramos, Trans. New York: Continuum.
- Graham, P. (in press/2017). *The Creel Century: Communication, corporatism, and eternal crisis*. New York: Routledge.
- Havey, D. & Puccio, D. (2016). *Sex, Likes and Social Media*. London: Vermilion.
- Klein, N. (2015) *This Changes Everything: Capitalism and the climate*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Livingstone, S. & Sefton-Green, J. (2016). *The Class: living and learning in the digital age*. New York: New York University Press.
- Luke, A. (1990). *Constructing the Child Viewer*. New York: Praeger Press.
- Luke, A. (in press/2017). *Critical Literacy, Schooling and Social Justice: Collected writings, vol. 1*. New York: Routledge.
- New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard educational review*, 66 (1), 60-93.
- Picciano, A. & Spring, J. (2012). *The Great American Education-Industrial Complex*. New York: Routledge.
- Quan-Haase, A. (2016). *Technology and Society: Social networks, power, and inequality*, 2nd ed. Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Share, J. (2009). *Media Literacy is Elementary*. (2. ed.) New York: Peter Lang.